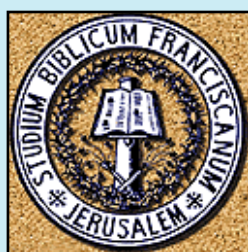


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An Alternative Way to Redemption Nature and Man in Wisdom Literature

Alviero Niccacci, O.F.M.

Wisdom and folly dispute among themselves for control over the roads of the city. They prepare a banquet, invite people, and make promises. They are two women, two forces in the scenery of life. They use a similar language, address the same people, yet invite in opposite directions.

Ch. 9 of the Book of Proverbs presents the two women one after the other—first Lady Wisdom (9:1-12), then the Foolish Woman (9:13-18).

*Wisdom has built her house, she has set up her seven pillars.
She has slaughtered her beasts, she has mixed her wine,
she has also set her table.*

*She has sent out her maids to call from the highest places in the town,
Whoever is simple, let him turn in here!*

To him who is without sense she says,

Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed.

Leave simpleness, and live, and walk in the way of insight. (9:1-6)

(...)

A foolish woman is noisy; she is wanton and knows no shame.

She sits at the door of her house,

she takes a seat on the high places of the town,

calling to those who pass by, who are going straight on their way,

Whoever is simple, let him turn in here!

And to him who is without sense she says,

Stolen water is sweet, and bread eaten in secret is pleasant.

But he does not know that the dead are there,

that her guests are in the depths of Sheol. (9:13-18)

The two women personify two teachings. The teaching itself is indicated as a banquet—eating and drinking. The house of wisdom is built by Lady Wisdom herself; the house of the Foolish Woman is placed in the Sheol, the realm of death. The people addressed by the two women are called the “simple ones” (*petaim*), a term that can have a negative connotation but does not when it is used to designate the addressees of the teaching. It designates people that are like an uncultivated field, or like an open receptacle and a impressionable clay. It might well designate mainly the young people, but the general designation that we read in 9:15 does not allow any strict interpretation: “She calls those who pass by, who are going straight on their way: «Whoever is simple, let him turn in here!»”.

We are confronted here with an attempt of giving a face and a voice to the two ways that are open before everyone, particularly in front of every young person:

See, I have set before you this day life and good, death and evil. (Deut 30:15)

Fire and water are placed before you; to whatever you prefer, extend your hands; life and death are placed before man; whatever he chooses shall be give unto him. (Sir 16:16-17)

Lady Wisdom is a figure that unifies different realities and different voices that have the same goal: to educate the “simple one”, the young man. The first voice that makes itself heard in the Book of Proverbs is that of the father:

Hear, my son, your father's instruction,

and reject not your mother's teaching. (1:8)

In reality, it is not father and mother that are speaking but the teacher that embodies both father and mother. The address “my son” is characteristic of wisdom teaching even in extra-biblical wisdom literature. It is more than a simple literary device; it is like in the good old days, when the teacher was a kind of extension of the paternal and maternal functions in the class-rooms. The address “my son” also indicates that the doctrine of the wisdom teacher echoes the ethics of the family and of the

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tribe—a whole complex of norms that was transmitted from mouth to mouth for generations in the framework of the patriarchal Israelite society.

The doctrine imparted by the wisdom teacher is also based on his own personal experience; it is the fruit of his own observations. The wisdom teaching does not request learning without personal control, on the authority or on the word of the master; on the contrary, it invites the disciples to observe by themselves and to take part in the experience:

Then I saw and considered it; I looked and received instruction. (Prov 24:32)

Did you see a man skillful in his work? (22:29)

Did you see a man who is wise in his own eyes? (26:12)

Did you see a man who is hasty in his words? (29:20)

This invitation to observation and personal experience is a favorite learning technique. It is found in the teachings of the peoples surrounding Israel, such as the Egyptians. It is also attested by the Rabbis, not to mention the wisdom Teacher that was Jesus of Nazareth:

Look at the birds of the air ... (Mat. 6:26)

Consider the lilies of the field ... (Mat. 6:28)

It is only natural that this kind of technique utilizes images, parables and concrete models:

Go to the ant, O sluggard; consider her ways, and be wise. (...)

How long will you lie there, O sluggard?

When will you arise from your sleep?

A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest, and poverty will come upon you like a vagabond, and want like an armed man. (Prov 6:6-11)

All this is the teaching of the wisdom sage in its different forms, that is: family instruction, personal experience, sayings of the teachers of the past, observation of creation, phenomena, and events. Lady Wisdom unifies in herself all these forms of learning. All the voices of creation are her voice.

But who is Lady Wisdom? Summarizing Prov 8, we can say that Lady Wisdom is a figure that surpasses every creature. She was beside God when he was creating the universe and found her delight before him. Afterwards among humanity she found her delight. Lady Wisdom is a figure both divine and human. She is a mysterious link between the Creator and the creatures. She is God's voice and the bearer of his demands; as we read:

Happy is the man who listens to me, watching daily at my gates, waiting beside my doors.

For he who finds me finds life and obtains favor from the Lord; but he who misses me injures himself;

all who hate me love death. (Prov 8:34-36)

The Foolish Woman, the opponent of Lady Wisdom, is a complex figure. She is mainly a symbol for the prostitute but also for the sinners that invite the young pupil to follow the road of an easy profit, as we read in Prov 1:10-19. She is also the symbol of the negative model that the teacher calls the “wicked” or the “fool” (see e.g. 10:1-16).

The prostitute embodies folly in such an eminent way that, as we read in 7:1-5, the main goal of the teaching of the sage is pushing the young pupil to the love of wisdom in order to make him capable of avoiding the seduction of the prostitute:

My son, keep my words

and treasure up my commandments with you;

keep my commandments and live,

keep my teachings as the apple of your eye;

bind them on your fingers,

write them on the tablet of your heart.

Say to wisdom, You are my sister,

and call insight your intimate friend;

in order to preserve you from the loose woman,

from the adventuress with her smooth words. (7:1-5)

Note that for “loose woman, adventuress” we read literally “foreign woman, stranger”—not for her nationality but in relation to moral standards of society.

A further characteristic of wisdom teaching is depicting reality in black and white, fool and sage, evil and good, with no nuances in-between. We have a clear example in Prov 10:

Blessings are on the head of the righteous,

but the mouth of the wicked conceals violence.

The memory of the righteous is a blessing,

but the name of the wicked will rot.

The wise of heart will heed commandments,

but a prating fool will come to ruin.

He who walks in integrity walks securely,

but he who perverts his ways will be found out. (10:6-9)



Maybe this black-and-white picture has an educational goal—to urge positive behavior and to keep away from the negative kind more persuasively. However, it is more that a functional device; it is a vision of reality in the light of faith. Now, according to wisdom mentality, creation stands on two pillars: God and the king. If God is the creator, nothing can escape his control; further, if the king is God's representative on earth, then nobody shall be able to escape the consequences of his behavior, either on earth or in the world to come.

*The eyes of the Lord are in every place,
keeping watch on the evil and the good. (15:3)*

*In the light of a king's face there is life,
and his favor is like the clouds that bring the spring rain. (16:15)*

*My son, fear the Lord and the king,
and do not disobey either of them;
for disaster from them will rise suddenly,
and who knows the ruin that will come from them both? (24:21-22)*

Sayings difficult to interpret

The texts we have been reading until now are better called “sayings” than “proverbs”. Although “proverbs” is a common designation for them (*mashal, meshalim* in Hebrew), it seems better to me not to use this term in order to avoid the impression that the wisdom sayings are popular proverbs. I think they are not. To be more precise, they are not popular proverbs in the original form; they are rather artistic, very sophisticated and condensed formulations of, say, traditional proverbs, family instructions, popular wisdom etc. Therefore, the large literature on the *mashal*, or proverb—both old and modern—does not help.

From the formal point of view, the wisdom sayings are affirmative, with verbs in the indicative mood. They are means capable of describing experiences, types of people, model situations. For this character they are easily distinguished from the other genre of compositions having a didactic or parenetic character. This other genre is called “instruction.” In instruction there prevails a direct address to the pupil or reader and volitive forms, especially imperatives. Saying and instruction are the main genres in the Book of Proverbs. Indeed, different collections can be identified in the Book of Proverbs on the basis of this criterion.

To interpret these wisdom sayings is a delicate task. The reason is implied in the character of biblical wisdom itself, that is basically a-systematic—not chaotic but bound to situation. Indeed, the ideal world of the sages is never described in a systematic, orderly way. A saying is, so to speak, the final product of an experience. The problem is that the experience itself is not described; we miss the setting of the sayings. Add to this that in the Book of Proverbs the sayings mostly occur as distinct, discrete items—one separate from the other from a literary point of view. From these considerations we can understand the difficulty of interpreting the wisdom sayings—we lack life setting and we lack literary context.

One possibility of reconstructing the ideal world of the biblical sages is, perhaps, to collect and compare sayings having similar vocabulary and specifically the same word pairs (we know that poetry consists of parallel pairs of words). In this way we run the risk of loosing the link with the literary context, but we acquire elements useful to outline the world view underlying the single sayings. We can, then, hope to get a glimpse into the ideal world of the biblical sages concerning favorite subjects such as riches, king, companions, speaking and being silent etc. See, e.g., the series of sayings on the righteous and on the wicked in contrast comparison found in Prov 10.

One thing we can say about the ideal world of the sages—that in it nothing is fixed or final. On the contrary, everything depends on the interplay of changing events and circumstances. Eventually, everything depends on God who hides himself behind the events and the circumstances of life. There is no definite solution once and for all; every solution must be formulated according to the circumstances and to the will of God in the present moment. Wisdom teaching is definitely bound to the situation seen as God's revelation.

Indeed, this instability produces uncertainty. It is, however, a beneficial uncertainty that forces us to be on the alert, with our eyes and ears wide open to God. It is a kind of uncertainty that does not produce fear but instead profound hope in the Lord.

In order to understand biblical wisdom correctly we must, I think, not to posit a distinction between reason and faith as is usual in modern, especially Western, mentality. As Gerhard von Rad rightly points out, Israel never did feel any rigid distinction or separation between sacred and profane wisdom, or between religious and secular experience. He writes as follows:

It was perhaps Israel's greatness that she did not keep faith and knowledge apart. The experiences of the world were for her divine experiences as well, and the experiences of God were for her experiences of the world. It has been rightly said that in all knowledge faith is also at work. Thus here, in proverbial wisdom, there is faith in the stabil-

The SBF is today a Roman Catholic Faculty of biblical and archaeological studies in the Holy Land sponsored by the Franciscan Custody of Terrasanta. It is located in the Old City of Jerusalem, in the Flagellation friary at the IInd Station of the Via Dolorosa.

As a research center, the SBF has been actively involved in rediscovering the sacred sites of the NT and early Christianity. Thus it expands and updates the histories of various Christian shrines. There is a special focus on the primitive Church in the Holy Land by making use of Jewish and Christian literary sources as well as the diaries and travel journals of pilgrims down through the centuries.

The SBF is also responsible for the courses of theological formation at the "Studium Theologicum Jerosolymitanum" in the Franciscan Monastery of St. Saviour.



*ity of the elementary relationships between man and man, faith in the similarity of men and of their reactions, faith in the reliability of the orders which support human life and thus, implicitly or explicitly, faith in God who puts these orders into operation. (G. von Rad, *The Wisdom in Israel*, SCM Press 1972, 62-63)*

Had modern interpreters understood this principle, they would not have accused biblical wisdom of being too secular, not enough theological, or even profane.

Moreover, it is common to see an evolution in the wisdom movement from profane to religious. Some think that wisdom sayings that were originally profane were, in the course of time—specifically in post-exilic times—“baptized”, as it were. According to this view, the sayings mentioning the name of the Lord are later additions in order to make the texts acceptable to the faith of Israel. In my opinion this view misses the point because it does not perceive the theological basis of biblical wisdom.

What is then the theological basis of wisdom? Very simply, biblical wisdom is based on the faith of God as the creator of the universe—not so much on the Lord, the God of Israel, but in God as the creator of *humanity*, ‘*adam*’—that is, humanity in the widest meaning of the word, beyond any distinction of race, language or religion. This is, I think, a very important point. It helps explain why is biblical wisdom so open to the outside world—more than any other part of the Hebrew Bible—the OT.

According to biblical wisdom, God is not only the one who created the world in the beginning but also the one who cares for it, who is provident and sustains every creature, who rewards the good and punishes the evil. God *is* in the world but remains behind the scene; he is present and elusive at the same time. He has created the order of the universe and normally lets the order work by itself, almost automatically—the evildoer gets his punishment and the one who does good gets his reward without God intervening openly. Yes, says the biblical sage, most of the times God does not show himself but is there, and whatever happens to you comes from him.

The fear of God and the self-revelation of creation

With this in mind, we can understand what is usually called the motto of biblical wisdom—“the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom”. The best translation of the Hebrew word *re’shit* is, I think, “beginning”, not “compendium, summary”, or “principal part, total, best part”. As von Rad puts it,

*The sentence means, therefore, that the fear of God leads to wisdom. It enables a man to acquire wisdom; it trains him for wisdom. (G. von Rad, *The Wisdom in Israel*, 66)*

In which sense does the fear of the Lord lead to wisdom? In the sense that it teaches a man or woman to believe in God as the creator of the universe and to recognize his or her own place in the universe as a creature. Such a man or woman has got the key to wisdom; only the true believer can find wisdom. If so, we understand that biblical wisdom is profoundly theological, not profane, from its very beginning. There has been an evolution in the wisdom movement, but hardly from a secular to a religious wisdom.

We have reached a good point of observation on biblical wisdom. However, in order to reach the peak, we have to add still another point. We shall call this point the self-revelation of creation. (Von Rad has a splendid chapter on this subject in his monograph *The Wisdom in Israel*.) At the beginning of this lecture we mentioned that wisdom is represented as a majestic woman, Lady Wisdom, who speaks to humanity, invites them to the banquet she has prepared, promises life and threatens death. We also mentioned that Lady Wisdom is the voice of God to humanity—but she is not God. What is she, after all? She is the voice of the created world; she is the personification of world order speaking to humanity.

What I am saying is the essence of the famous passage in Proverbs 8, especially the passage beginning with the following words:

The Lord created me as the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of old.

Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth. (8:22-23 RSV)

Before creating God made a plan of what he was going to create. This plan is his wisdom, and God created everything in accordance with it. In Ben Sira’s words, the wisdom of God was “poured” into each created thing; thus, every created thing contains something of God’s wisdom. Now, how do human beings get wisdom? By coming to know the different creatures of the world. And how will they come to know the creatures? By coming in a relationship with them, by using them, or—as we read in Genesis chapter 3—by eating them, i.e. by personal experience. In this way one is able to acquire wisdom. The wisdom acquired is nothing else but God’s wisdom. Yet, as we know from the story in Genesis 3, wisdom acquired against the will of the Creator brings death instead of life; wisdom can only bring life when it is gained according to the will of the creator and in obedience. This is the lesson of Genesis 3—that is basically a wisdom story. Adam and Eve really acquire wisdom, God’s wisdom, and become like God. (God is not joking when he says: “the man has

The SBF has been involved in Archaeological excavations in various areas of the Holy Land: Bethany, Bethlehem (Church of the Nativity and Shepherd's Field), Beth-phage, Cana, Capernaum, Ein Karem, Emmaus (el-Qubeibeh), Jerusalem (Ascension, Dominus Flevit, Gethsemane, Holy Sepulchre, Tomb of Mary), Herodion, Machaerus, Magdala, Nazareth, Nebo, Tabgha and Tabor. Reports on the excavations are published annually in the review Liber Annuus, and in the Collectio Maior and Collectio Minor series; biblical and patristic studies are published in the Analecta series; collections of the museum are illustrated in the Museum series.

become like one of us, knowing good and evil”).) But, the knowledge acquired against God’s will is a knowledge that brings death.

This is where the motto of wisdom comes again into play—the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom. Human beings can acquire true wisdom only if they recognize God as their creator and obey him. The fear of God is a kind of hermeneutical key to reality. It is the Hebrew principle of knowledge in the sense that true knowledge of reality can only be achieved through the fear of the Lord. This is how philosophy and theology merge in the vision of the biblical sage.

Let us come back to Lady Wisdom. As already indicated, she personifies the creatures of the word. She is a person, not an inanimate being. This is a way of telling us that every creature, even a stone, a flower, or the sky, is not an object but a subject—not something that we use, but someone with whom we come into a personal relationship. The whole world is an immense, living organism that reveals itself to humanity. This is the meaning of what we called the ‘self-revelation of creation.’ As we read in Psalm 19:

*The heavens are telling the glory of God;
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.
Day to day pours forth speech,
and night to night declares knowledge.
There is no speech, nor are there words;
their voice is not heard;
yet their voice goes out through all the earth,
and their words to the end of the world. (Ps 19:2-4)*

The sage, the one who fears God, is able to perceive this cosmic concert of voices and sounds and to understand the message of creation. Such was our St. Francis of Assisi—allow me to say this. As his biographer St Bonaventure writes,

Francis sought occasion to love God in everything. He delighted in all the works of God’s hands and from the vision of joy on earth his mind soared aloft to the life-giving source and cause of all. In everything beautiful, he saw him who is beauty itself, and he followed his Beloved everywhere by his likeness imprinted on creation; of all creation he made a ladder by which he might mount up and embrace Him who is all-desirable. By the power of his extraordinary faith he tasted the Goodness which is the source of all in each and every created thing, as in so many rivulets. He seemed to perceive a divine harmony in the interplay of powers and faculties given by God to his creatures and like the prophet David he exhorted them all to praise God. (St Bonaventure, Leg.ma. IX,1)

A true revelation comes, then, from the world—a voice of God coming from the creatures, and a voice of the creatures pointing to God. The creatures are living and have a voice because they contain wisdom, because God’s wisdom has been poured into each one of them. They are capable of speaking to humanity and humanity is capable of knowing them because the same divine wisdom is poured into them also. Wisdom is harmony in itself; wisdom is cosmic link; wisdom is a mediator between the creator and the creation; finally, for those who believe in the NT, wisdom is the Son of God made flesh, the mediator between God and humanity, the perfect harmony of the universe.

This is the complete trajectory of God’s wisdom—from creation to redemption; from Lady Wisdom to Jesus of Nazareth, the wisdom teacher, the incarnate Wisdom and the supreme meaning of creation because he is the creator, the mediator and the redeemer of creation.

An alternative view

In the last sentence I have outlined the whole trajectory of wisdom and a thread of unity between the two Testaments. Yet, the wisdom perspective I have presented until now does not envisage any redemption simply because every creature is good and contains a particle of God’s wisdom. This is basically the perspective of the Book of Proverbs and of its distant but close descendant (canonical or not)—the Book of Ben Sira.

Still this is not the wisdom perspective *tout court*. In other books also belonging, as I think, to the wisdom movement, we find different—even apparently conflicting views. But before coming to this point, I need to clarify the theological orientation of the wisdom movement in comparison with the rest of the Hebrew Bible, or the OT—because of that I speak of an *alternative* way to redemption, or to salvation, in the wisdom movement.

It is embarrassing to discover that Proverbs, Job, Qoheleth and the Song of Songs (also belonging to the wisdom movement in my opinion) never mention the great works of God in Israel’s sacred history. Indeed, sacred history—with its favorite themes of Israel, election, covenant, and law—are not an issue in the wisdom tradition until Ben Sira, Baruch and Wisdom of Solomon in the third-second cent. B.C.E. Not only are these themes not mentioned, but they are also not included or implied in the horizon of these books. Sacred history is simply not necessary for the interpretation of

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the older wisdom.

When, in the third-second century B.C.E., Ben Sira and Baruch declared that wisdom is the Law of Moses, they did not intend to deny the wisdom tradition but rather to enrich it. From that time on, wisdom included the Law as a form of revelation and as a model of life. In fact, it is the one and same God that created the universe and redeemed Israel. For Christians, this wisdom motif directly reaches the person of Jesus of Nazareth. He is the perfect incarnation of God. He fulfills both creation and redemption up to the point that creation is redeemed and redemption involves a new creation.

An integrated, compact interpretation of wisdom emerges from this outline. However, we have to be aware of the fact that the large majority of biblical scholars do not share this idea. For most of them, the Book of Proverbs is optimistic to the point of being dogmatic and forgetting reality. The same is true of Ben Sira, Baruch and the Wisdom of Solomon. Job, on the contrary, appears to them to be too problematic and even blasphemous, while Qoheleth is too devastating in his statements, and the Song of Songs too erotic. Here we come to our point—in the wisdom books we find different, maybe conflicting views.

It is not my intention here to disprove the majority opinion—not an easy task, in any case. It is enough for me to summarize my interpretation of biblical wisdom at large, taking into account all the books concerned. The Book of *Proverbs* is certainly optimistic. From its perspective, Proverbs has all the reasons to be such since God is present in the world with his wisdom and providence. It is God that men and women meet in their experiences of life; he is their provident creator—not destiny or other powers they should be afraid of. The Book of Proverbs is also optimistic because of its pedagogic orientation, in order to persuasively attract young people to the hard way of wisdom.

The Book of *Job* shows a different concern. If suffering might be seen as punishment, this is not the case with the suffering of the righteous. To focus this problem the story of Job is presented—a man that “was blameless and upright, who feared God, and turned away from evil,” and still he was struck by terrible calamities. Job’s story serves as the framework for a great theological problem: the relationship between the creature and his Creator. A solution to this problem maintains that man cannot be right before God, or claim any right, or call upon him to account for his behavior. Another solution claims that suffering can be an act of grace because God may send it with the purpose of producing repentance and praise in man. However, no human reason, no matter how theological it might be, can satisfy the suffering person. The solution to the problem can only come from the vision of God and from the contemplation of his wisdom. God is the one who has created all the mighty beings of the universe and controls everything that remains beyond man’s authority. The contemplation of God’s power over the universe can make the incomprehensible suffering acceptable. It can convince man that suffering has a meaning in God’s superior plan.

The drama of the Book of Job, with all its vehement invectives and scraps of unexpected faith, and finally with the contemplation of God’s wisdom, force and providence in the universe, is the best possible means to help those who are embittered in their spirits. It would be unfit, of course, to speak to them in the language of the Book of Proverbs. Indeed, God’s contemplation proposed by the Book of Job can help those people overcome self-centeredness and look at their problems in God’s perspective.

(*Qoheleth*) By meditating on the vanity of human activity, people might arrive to the brink of despair. No trace remains of all man’s work, nor does any advantage come from it. This meditation might bring people to a point where wisdom and folly join and touch one another dangerously. The sage is not able to completely embrace wisdom nor is he able to totally free himself from folly. The solution proposed in the Book of *Qoheleth* is to keep the opposites together in a balance that is, however, painful and even agonizing. Wisdom has advantages but cannot free people from death. Human work is basically a research on God’s works of creation. It is, however, vanity and a striving after wind, says Qoheleth. What is left for humans? The final answer of Qoheleth reads as follows: to enjoy oneself when God bestows gladness; to ponder things when God sends suffering. This solution is frequently misinterpreted as hedonistic or opportunistic. It is, however, a wise equidistance from the opposites in a anguishing effort to grasp the moment from God’s hand, because that is man’s portion in life and in his toil at which he toils under the sun.

Thus, Qoheleth represents a unique and powerful proposal for those people who sense the tremendous responsibility of every-day’s life—both its importance and its vanity. Qoheleth fits those people who wish to get to the bottom of things—especially the meaning of human activity on earth. Qoheleth’s solution of keeping the opposites together is capable of encouraging people to fully appreciate the physical reality seen in a close relationship with the activity of God himself in creation. It also helps to perceive the relativity, risks and deficiencies of reality.

(*Song of Songs*) To the surprise and even scandal of many during the centuries, God’s revelation through creation has chosen as its intermediary the love story of two young people in the *Song of Songs*. The boy and the girl open themselves up to life by discovering one another in the framework of the countryside where flowers blossom and trees grow. Through their love God is revealed as Love, the power of life. Interpreted in this way, the Song of Songs is not profane at all. On the contrary, it means that human love is a sacrament of God. In this perspective the Song of Songs can be interpreted in a spiritual and even mystical way as was done during the centuries both by Rabbis





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and by the Church Fathers. In fact, in the key passage for the interpretation of the Song of Songs love is exalted beyond everything as the force of life in the world contrasting the force of death.

Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm; for love is strong as death, jealousy is hard as the grave. Its flashes are flashes of fire, a most vehement flame. Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it. If a man offered for love all the wealth of his house, it would be utterly scorned. (Song of Songs 8:6-7)

Love is above everything as is wisdom in the book of Proverbs. This is a small, yet important thread linking two books that appear so different.

Thus, the Song of Songs, interpreted literally, need not be rejected, nor regarded with suspicion because of its erotic character. Indeed, it *is* erotic, but its purpose is to show that the love of young people is a special form of revelation for the adults. It is a revelation of God as Love and as the force of life present in the world. As a consequence, the allegorical and spiritual interpretation, that is traditional both in the Jewish and Christian literature, can be derived from the literal meaning naturally and without any breaks or discontinuities. The reason is simply that the reference point is not human love but God's love—or God as Love—revealed through human love. The different kinds of erotic and of spiritual love are not irreconcilable. They are rather revelatory manifestations of the one and the same Love for humanity.

My suggestion is therefore as follows. Let us listen to the different books in what they have to say to us—nothing more and nothing less. Let us not expect them to give comprehensive or dogmatically precise answers. Perhaps more than elsewhere, the reader is called upon to reconstruct by himself, little by little, as a kind of mosaic, the conception of world, life, and God in the wisdom books.

We find both diversity and unity in the wisdom tradition. The unity of diversity is done in the house of Lady Wisdom. The main criteria under which the unity is done are fear of the Lord and revelation through creation. The fear of the Lord is a major principle underlying all the wisdom books—except for the Song of Songs. The concept of revelation through creation is present in all the books. This concept is enough, in my opinion, to make the Song of Songs a wisdom book although God is not explicitly mentioned.

The deeper we look into the different wisdom books, the clearer we perceive a profound consonance under the dissonance on the surface. This fact does not mean that the differences are diminished or invalidated. As I think, the differences depend on the situations in life that are specific to the different wisdom books. These are experiences of everyday life—in Proverbs and Ben Sira—or, on the contrary, strong experiences not representing normality but emergency in life—especially Job. The dissonance is due to this exterior difference while the ultimate meaning and the revelation that comes out for humankind constitute the consonance.

We can say that the consonance concerns the relationship between humankind and God while the dissonance depends on the different situations in which that relationship takes place. These situations are, in turn, the instruction of the family and of the wisdom teacher, the observation and the revelation of creation, suffering, the frustrating reality of human work, love in adolescence, the sacred history.

In sum, wisdom teaches humankind to experience the world as a sacrament—a sacrament that allows meeting God in fear.

Wisdom ethics

The ethics that derives from this world view is fundamentally concordant, but still bears the mark of the differences from which it derives. Fundamentally, it is the ethics of the fear of God. However, it recommends different attitudes from time to time, such as doing something and abstaining from doing; caution, yet not paralysis; moderation that does not prevent people from enjoying the present.

Saying that biblical wisdom proclaims the ethics of the fear of God may sound not very pleasant to modern ears. One should, however, remember the correct meaning of the well-known wisdom motto “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” In biblical terms, fear is not the opposite of love, nor is a relationship based on God's fear one of submission for dread of punishment. Only those who proclaim freedom at any costs might think in that way. On the contrary, the motto of the fear of God teaches supreme freedom and at the same time supreme dependence; supreme creativity and supreme submission; supreme greatness and supreme smallness. Wisdom is to keep opposites together.

A characteristic of the wisdom ethics is the concern about proper time. Wisdom ethics knows a constant attitude, that is the fear of God, but no behavior fixed once for ever. The fear of God is a challenge to constantly live open to the unpredictable God—eyes, ears and heart, exterior and interior must be wide open to him.

Since God is unpredictable, human behavior can never be unequivocal. It always needs to adapt itself to the changing circumstances or—which is the same thing—to God's revelation and will in that specific moment.

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Wisdom ethics engages all human capabilities, especially the heart. The heart is the interior cas- ket where every human being finds himself and experiences God's sovereign presence; it is the melting-pot of every experience; the seat of revelation and the meeting-place of God and the self. Those who are not ready to engage themselves up to the level of their heart, will never reach wisdom because they will never meet God, although wisdom and God, which are one reality, are all around him and mysteriously embrace them.

Wisdom ethics are, then, the ethics of proper time; yet this does not mean time-serving because the criterion is not human advantage but God's will in a given situation. I'm sure that we can learn a lot from the wisdom books about morality.

Despite all the appearances, wisdom is, then, profoundly theological. The fact that wisdom does not refer to the Sinai revelation is no handicap. Indeed, wisdom possesses a theology, ethics, spiritu- ality and soteriology of its own from its oldest phase.

It would seem that the importance of the Law, covenant and election imposed itself in Israel by the time of the deuteronomistic reform in the seventh century B.C.E. The very fact that the older wisdom does not consider these issues can be seen as a sign of its antiquity. To ignore these issues after the seventh century would have been hardly understandable.

Clearly, the men of Hezekiah that copied and transmitted the proverbs of Solomon according to Prov 25:1, did not find in them anything despicable or deficient. Probably, in the time of Hezekiah the deuteronomic reform was started. Hezekiah tried to rebuild the nation on a religious and social level based upon the foundations of covenant and election. The historical occasion was provided by the influx into Jerusalem of the Israelite refugees from the Northern kingdom after the fall of their capital Samaria in 722 B.C.E. Acting as a new Solomon, Hezekiah encouraged such an influx. He also proclaimed a common Passover, and built a new quarter in Jerusalem with the intention of reuniting the scattered people and building a united nation anew.

It was, then, a period rich of hopes, new insights and activities. The northern traditions merged with the southern ones. Ancient religious compositions—specifically a large part of wisdom—were studied and copied. Some received their final form in that time. It is certainly not by chance that biblical wisdom is especially related to two royal figures—Solomon, the initiator of the wisdom movement and the organizer of the Hebrew state, and Hezekiah, the transmitter of the wisdom literature and the restorer of the state and of the national consciousness.

In conclusion, Wisdom appeals to humankind in concrete situations, small or great, of life. It addresses the problems of the individual and the problems of social life that are not addressed by the rest of the OT. It is a secular morality in the positive sense of the word. It is world-oriented without repudiating the temple and its cult. Its temple is, however, mainly the world. From the world comes the will of God who reveals himself to humanity and goes off to meet people. In the world unfolds itself the task of men and women—in themselves, in the family and in society.



**MAY GOD
GIVE YOU
HIS PEACE**